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# Cows, Bandits, and Violent Conflicts: Understanding Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria

Azeez Olaniyan and Aliyu Yahaya

**Abstract:** Cattle rustlings have become a major crime in Nigeria recently, with the northern region being the hardest hit. In the past few years, rustling activities have resulted in the theft of a huge number of cows, deaths of people and destruction of property. Daily reports across the northern region have confirmed that cattle rustlings have significantly contributed to the increasing security challenges facing the Nigerian state and seem to have become big business involving the herders, big-time syndicates, and heavily armed bandits. However, despite the growing level of cattle rustling and its consequences for society, the situation has yet to receive adequate scholarly interrogation. This paper investigates the causes and consequences of, and state responses to cattle rustling in Nigeria.

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**Keywords:** Nigeria, livestock farming, cattle, violent crimes, organised crime

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Cattle rustling has recently become a major internal security concern in Nigeria, with the country's northern region as the epicentre. Reports of bandits with automatic weapons storming herders' settlements and farms with the mission of killing people and pillaging cows proliferate. According to Ahmadu Suleiman, chairman of the Kaduna State chapter of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, between October 2013 and March 2014 approximately 7,000 cattle were rustled from commercial livestock farms and traditional herders in Northern Nigeria (Bashir 2014). Aminu Bello Masari, the governor of Katsina State, announced the recovery of 30,000 cattle from rustlers within a few months of setting up a joint military operation against the menace (Tauna 2016). In most cases, the rustlers kill and maim their herders and rape the women before disposing them of their cows (Akowe and Kayode 2014); in some instances, they also kidnap girls or women in the process (Adeniyi 2015; Yusuf 2015).

Virtually all of the states in the northern region of Nigeria are affected by cattle rustling. In Plateau State, cattle-rustling activities are prevalent in eight (Mangu, Bokkos, Barkin Ladi, Shendam, Jos South, Riyom, Langtang North, and Langtang South) out of the 17 local government areas (Abimaje 2014; Yusufu 2014). Tony Akowe and Bodunrin Kayode (2014) reported that several villages in the areas lying between the four northern states of Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara, and Niger have been under siege from cattle rustlers who freely unleash terror on hapless herders and cow farmers. The Special Task Force (STF) set up by the Nigerian security forces in response to the security challenges in Jos, Plateau State, confirmed that within a period of six months 160 attacks by gunmen resulted in 2,501 cows being rustled and 260 people losing their lives. In most cases, the rustlers wore military-style camouflaged uniforms and showed considerable experience in herding; in some instances, cattle were "kidnapped," with the rustlers asking for money afterwards (Adeniyi 2015). Although cattle rustling has been rampant in the rural areas of Northern Nigeria, it not only poses serious security challenges at the specific sites of conflict but also threatens to engulf places outside of the rural sector and Northern Nigeria.

The literature on cattle rustling and the violent conflict linked to it has consistently been growing in other parts of Africa (Kaimba et al. 2011; Nganga 2012; Schilling et al. 2012; Greiner 2013). In Nigeria, however, apart from studies focusing on clashes between herders and farming communities (such as Ofuoku and Isifie 2009; Okoli and Atelhe 2014; Blench 2003; Olaniyan and Okeke-Uzodike 2015), predatory cattle rustling has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. The few attempts to address this issue, commendable as they are, suffer either from being

essentially descriptive in nature (Kwaja 2014) or because their insights and implications derive principally from the East African experience (Okoli and Okpaleke 2014). Nevertheless, as is the case elsewhere, the contemporary spate of violence and the destructive aftermath linked to cattle rustling begs for attention. The present study seeks to understand the contours, trends, and trajectory of cattle rustling in Northern Nigeria and how the state has responded to the threat it poses.

## Theoretical Setting

The literature on cattle rustling has been dominated by scholars from East Africa, largely due to the peculiarity of the problem to the area. The incidence of cattle rustling – in its present, violent form – is a recent development in Nigeria. The growing level of literature on the phenomenon indicates a growing problem across Africa, with devastating consequences outside of its locality. It has become a major source of concern, due not only to its implications on the size of the herd and the suffering it generates, but also to the threat it poses to the very survival of state institutions in the places where it occurs. While still primarily a rural-sector activity, where the capacity of state institutions to effectively mediate competing demands are threatened, relatively weak, or non-existent, the interjection of modern destructive weapons and extreme violence accompanying cattle theft signify its transition from mere cattle raiding into a ruthless, weaponised, highly organised, profit-oriented, translocational and transnational consortium. The extreme violence associated with cattle rustling has assumed an unimaginable dimension, with murder, rape, human displacement, the burning of entire community settlements and the destruction of livelihoods, among other horrors, heavily lacing the process. The spread of the phenomenon into other parts of the continent has elicited a variety of explanatory models that could suitably be examined in the context of distinct but interrelated phases.

The explanatory model that was most prevalent prior to the 1990s associated cattle theft with pastoralists' cultural traditions or with the effects of ecology on pastoralism. At this time, cattle raiding was relatively localised, seasonal, and pursued with mostly traditional weapons, and there was a low level of violence associated with it. Although raiding appeared lawless, it was governed by some sort of acceptable customary rules of engagement among the pastoralists groups involved (Triche 2014). The literature attributing the phenomenon to issues of culture linked raiding with the pastoralists' cultural imagery of bravery and warrior tradition, generational contests, or an unforgiving, revenge-seeking

venture (Katsuyoshi and Turton 1979; Nganga 2012). Some of the literature argued that the foundation of cattle rustling was based on the notion of either scarcity of pastureland and water and the incessant struggle over access to rapidly depleting resources, resulting in conflicts with similarly interested groups (Markakis 1998), or the imbalance of the ecosystem arising from natural calamities such as droughts, diseases, and the like, leading to loss of cattle and motivating the desire to restock lost herd through raiding (Toulmin 1995). Livestock theft was not yet informed by the logic of the market; rather, stolen stock was mainly redistributed, used to pay bride prices, and by tradition, raiding prowess is regarded a rite of passage to manhood within pastoralist communities (Fleisher 2002).

The 1990s witnessed a shift in emphasis as the explanatory model that emerged from the literature identified the intrusion and the proliferation of modern, sophisticated weapons (Mkutu 2008; Scheffran et al. 2012; Greiner 2013). A market for the quick disposal of stock stimulated the influx of non-pastoralist actors into the cattle-rustling enterprise. Cattle theft was now inspired by the logic of localised “stock redistribution” among participating pastoralist communities, and the practice assumed a translocational and transnational character (Alemika 2003; Okoli and Okpaleke 2014). Cattle rustling became a “predatory enterprise” (Fleisher 2002) with a “vent for surplus,” metamorphosing into highly commercialised and profit-oriented ventures (Manu et al. 2014; Greiner 2013). Consequently, rustling became part of an organised criminal “underworld franchise” (Kwaja 2014; Okoli and Okpaleke 2014).

## Pastoralism and Cattle Rustling in Nigeria

The growing phenomenon of cattle rustling is one of transformation from the hitherto Fulani cultural practice of testing a person’s personal bravery and prowess at bloody warfare involving various groups and actors. This transformation has seen the emergence of well-coordinated and well-funded banditry in virtually every state in the northern area, with the Fulani ethnic group often considered at the epicentre of the scenario because of its deep involvement in pastoralism. However, herding livestock is not an exclusive preserve of Fulani; in Nigeria alone, 14 other ethnic groups, including the Shuwa, Kanuri, Kanembu, Arabs, and Touareg, are in some way involved in it (Blench 2003). Fulani own approximately 90 per cent of the livestock and contribute about 3.2 per cent of the country’s GDP (Köster and de Wolff 2012). Fulani view cattle herding not necessarily as a delightful endeavour but as a profitable vocation that is taxing, strenuous, and exhausting. Thus, cattle serve

multiple purposes for them, including the provision of milk and beef, the opportunity to breed cattle and beautify stock, and as carriers and sources of income. In addition to being working capital, the cattle represent a social-security guarantee and inheritable assets for the herder's family, particularly for his offspring. So central is the herd as pastoral capital that, aside from functioning as a means of production, storage, and transport, and a way to transfer food and wealth to the Fulani, its size indicates the social status of the individual or family and evokes an unspoken dictum to strive to increase the herd.

The pastoral system is patently both masculinised and youth-dominated, with women relegated to the background and owning little stock. A woman with six cows is considered wealthy, while a male with 20 cows is seen as poor. A man's lifelong ambition is governed by the aspiration to maintain healthy stock and increase his herd's size to the best of his ability and by any means. Pastoralism as an economic enterprise is perceived as a prosperous vocation and, thus, mere possession of cattle singles Fulani out as affluent, thereby raising the prospect of predation from less-endowed individuals, communities, and rustling cartels (Olaniyan, Francis, and Okeke-Uzodike 2015). Consequently, Northern Nigeria has experienced an unrestrained escalation of cattle rustling, with maiming, raping, killing, and pillaging taking place in the process.

## Triggers of Cattle Rustling

The current state of militarised cattle rustling represents a transformation from the erstwhile traditional practice of cattle raiding (Osamba 2000). Fulani have practised cattle raiding for many years as a cultural pattern of showing prowess and of restocking depleted stock. It is generally non-militarised. However, the current spate of rustling is heavily militarised and deadly. A number of factors are attributable to this transformation. In the first instance, contemporary cattle-rustling activities operate as a form of organised crime, motivated by wealth accumulation given that proceeds are never subject to state taxation (Alemika 2013, Okoli and Okpaleke 2014). A major impetus for the syndicated criminality is the presence of what Chris Kwaja (2014) captured as the "underground economy," which is linked to the political economy of some agrarian societies. An underground economy thrives on secrecy and the accumulation of untaxed wealth. In essence, the shadow economy in this case acts as an outlet for stolen cows and brings in a lot of cash.

Some of the sources of funding for terrorists groups in Northern Nigeria have been linked to cattle rustling, too. As Governor Shetima of

Borno State claimed, a direct link between cattle rustling and Boko Haram insurgency has been established through intelligence reports. In his words:

Our security agencies have reasonably established that most of the cattle being traded at the markets [in Borno State] were the direct proceeds of cattle-rustling perpetrated by insurgents [and] were sold at prohibitive costs to unsuspecting customers through some unscrupulous middlemen who use underhand ploy[s] to deliberately disguise the transactions as legitimate. The money realised from such transaction[s] would then be channelled to fund their deadly activities (Ogbeche 2016).

The discovery of this linkage prompted the governor to impose a ban on the sale of dried meat in the state. He also restricted the importation and sale of cattle to members of the Borno State branch of the Butchers and Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (Ogbeche 2016).

In his analysis, which focused on the Horn of Africa, Markakis (1993) argued that cattle rustling is primarily the result of a “shrinking resource base” that has triggered an intense war of struggle for survival, which in turn poses serious threats to the existence of some groups. Just like a modern war, it is waged with the aid of sophisticated weapons. Our study discovers the involvement of cattle herders in the rustling business. A corollary to this development is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons across the country. The possession of these arms by non-state actors has set in motion chains of security challenges, one of which is the ability to organise armed syndicates to perpetrate cattle rustling. This situation is compounded by the inability of the Nigerian state to take control of the situation – evidence of increasing state weakness (Kwaja 2014).

Another trigger of the rustling business is the presence of large swathes of forest reserves that are generally out of the reach of the Nigerian security operatives. Most of the rustling activities take place in state-owned reserves such as the Kamuku, Kiyanbana, and Fagore forests in Northern Nigeria. The forests offer perfect locations for the criminals to hide out from security forces. The reluctance of the Nigerian security operatives to enter these forest areas seems to be largely due to inefficiency, collaboration, and corruption. First, one major consequence of the lack of equipment and poor motivation of the Nigerian security forces is gross inefficiency. The Nigerian security operatives are ill equipped and ill motivated; in contrast, the criminals are well armed and motivated. Second, security forces and rustlers are often in cahoots. This seems obvious given the open manner of rustling and the reluctance of



the security operatives to act, even when provided with intelligence by local residents. A third issue is corruption. Y. Z. Ya'u, executive director of the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), a non-governmental body funded by the MacArthur Foundation that is developing workable technological innovations against cattle rustling in Nigeria, stated:

People steal hundreds of cattle, move them around for days and they don't get apprehended, which means there is a problem with our security system. Secondly, if they can take them to our markets here in Nigeria and sell them off, it means there is not only a problem with our intelligence gathering system but also a form of collaboration with the dealers because the major cattle dealers in the markets ought to know if the cows are stolen. It illustrates that there is a wave of collaborations at various levels of cattle rustling and there is an obvious inability of the police and other security outfits to deal with the problem because firstly they are insufficiently equipped to be able to handle the challenge. Second, there is a form of collaboration between criminal elements and security agents and thirdly there is outright corruption. (*National Express* 2016)

The conversion of forest reserves to locations of criminal activities and the ineffectiveness of the Nigerian security operatives has created ungoverned spaces. Theresa Whelan (2006: 64) conceptualised such ungoverned space as “a physical or non-physical area where there is an absence of state capacity or political will to exercise control.” She claimed that the physical refers to land and maritime areas, while the non-physical captures areas such as the financial space, utilised by criminal groups to transact money for nefarious activities. Such arguments suggest that the Nigerian forest reserves could turn into ungoverned spaces. By law, forest reservation as a means of conservation is itself “a sensitive social and political issue” (Areola 1987: 277) that the state employs deliberately to preserve forests for the benefits of humanity. Therefore, the forests are products of legality and ought to be properly secured. However, the increasing invasion and conversion of the forest spaces in Nigeria for criminal purposes has raised serious issues of security and the larger question of the widening of ungoverned spaces. Forest reserves are increasingly becoming bases for insurgents to launch attacks; hideouts for armed robbers who launch attacks on travellers and traders; hideouts for thieves, criminals, and cattle rustlers; and bases for attacks on local people (Ladan 2014). The lack of government presence in these areas constitutes a trigger for criminal operatives to operate with impunity.

## State Response

The Nigerian government's response to the security threat has been rather slow and generally reactive. It was only in 2014 that a concerted effort started to emerge. One such attempt involved the Nigerian Police Force, under Inspector-General Suleiman Abba, launching the Task Force on Cattle Rustling and Associated Crime. The task force was to be responsible for patrolling and operating in the context of intelligence gathering on anti-rustling and related crimes, in addition to investigating and possibly prosecuting reported cases of such crimes (Yusuf 2015). However, the task force has been relatively inactive since its creation. By 2015, some governors of northern states also started showing interest in the anti-rustling fight. Between July and October of that year, they held two meetings in which they agreed to pool their resources to fund a joint operation involving the military, the police, the state security service, and the Civil Defence Corps in order to comb the forests that are believed to be havens for cow thieves in the affected states (Binniyat 2015). However, the agreement resulted in more talk than action. Nonetheless, the initiative was effectively put into practice by the Niger State government when it established its own joint patrol, codenamed Operation Sharan Daji.<sup>1</sup> The operation – which brings together the military, police, security service, civil defence corps, and local vigilante groups – works by proactively engaging with the rustlers in the forests. Within a week of its establishment, a total of 118 cows and 23 sheep had been recovered from rustlers (*Channels TV* 2016). The same method of joint patrol operation was also put in place by the Katsina State government in late 2015.

However, the most innovative response came from the Kaduna State government. The steps include embedding security agents amongst herders to protect them against armed rustlers; tightening state borders to prevent transborder influx of rustlers; and, most importantly, implanting computer microchips in the animals to monitor their movements and prevent armed bandits from stealing them (Jimoh 2015). The Kaduna initiative, termed the “El-Rufai Model,” represents a proactive and pre-emptive approach by the use of information and communication technology (ICT) (*Leadership* 2015). However, it remains a proposal, and nobody knows when it will be implemented.

Nevertheless, state actions have reduced the incidence of cattle rustling in recent times. On several occasions, thousands of cattle have been recovered and returned to owners. For example, as of 7 March 2016, the

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1 *Sharan daji* means “clear up” in Hausa.

joint patrol team put in place by the Katsina government had recovered 12,000 cattle within a few days of operation (Elazeh 2016). In addition, a number of rustlers have been arrested and prosecuted. The security forces have also been able to invade some of the rustlers' hideouts, with the aid of the military forces. Despite such gains, the cow-rustling menace is far from eradicated. The clash between cattle herders and members of the Agatu ethnic group in Benue State on 10 March 2016 resulted in the death of an estimated 300 people linked to accusations of cattle rustling (Godwin 2016).

## Conclusion

Cattle rustling has emerged as a major security challenge in Nigeria. As a criminal enterprise it has consequences for the socio-economic, political, cultural, and psychological spheres of society. At the economic level, it constitutes a major threat to the livelihood of herders and those who depend on cows for survival. At the socio-political level, rustlers' activities have resulted in death, loss, and the destruction of lives and property, thereby disturbing peace and security. Therefore, the Nigerian government is expending major resources to eradicate rustling. At the psychological level, a vast number of people have been disposed of their belongings, and families have been traumatised; there have been reported cases of rape and kidnapping, which has caused psychological trauma.

It is important for the government to deploy security personnel to the forests that serve as hideouts for the marauders. The forests must be governed and the illegal users must be dislodged and permanently prevented from controlling the spaces. In addition, the security forces must strengthen the intelligence-gathering system, with support from the local population. Also, the Butchers and Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria must be involved in the fight. They are in a better position to identify rustled cows when they are brought to the market. The most important strategy is the use of technology, as initiated by the government of Kaduna State. The use of computer microchips will determine the location of the animals and the herders and enable tracking by the security forces.

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## Rinder, Banditen und Gewalt: Viehdiebstahl in Nordnigeria

**Zusammenfassung:** In jüngster Zeit hat sich der Viehraub in Nigeria zu einer bedrohlichen Form der Kriminalität entwickelt; der Norden ist am stärksten betroffen. Viehdiebstähle haben in den vergangenen Jahren zum Raub zahlreicher Rinder, zum Tod von Menschen und zu massiver Zerstörung von Eigentum geführt. Tägliche Berichte über entsprechende Ereignisse im Norden Nigerias bestätigen, dass der Viehdiebstahl inzwischen erheblich zu den wachsenden Sicherheitsproblemen des Landes beiträgt. Er ist zu einem großen Geschäft geworden, an dem Viehhalter, große Syndikate und schwerbewaffnete Banditen beteiligt sind. Trotz des zunehmenden Umfangs der Raubzüge und ihrer gesellschaftlichen Folgen wird diese Situation bislang nicht angemessen wissenschaftlich erforscht. Der vorliegende Beitrag widmet sich den Ursachen und Folgen des Viehdiebstahls in Nigeria und zeigt Reaktionen des Staates auf.

**Schlagwörter:** Nigeria, Viehwirtschaft, Rinder, Gewaltverbrechen, Organisierte Kriminalität